DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 221 CS 504 251

AUTHOR Woal, Michael B.
TITLE All-News Radio Journalism: Source, Message and Audience.
PUB DATE Jul 82
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at a Meeting of the Popular Culture Association (Atlanta, GA, 1982). Appears, also, in the Pennsylvania Speech Communication Annual, volume 39, 1983.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Analysis; Discourse Analysis; *Information Sources; Journalism; *News Reporting; Production Techniques; *Programing (Broadcast); *Radio; *Socioeconomic Status
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Response; *Journalistic Style

ABSTRACT

All-news radio is an important journalistic voice for large audiences. To maximize the size of audiences, all-news programing avoids specific partisan appeals. Three aspects of the objective journalistic style are important in forming the discourse of "newsradio": legitimatization, the creation of hierarchies of values; dramatic narration, a representational mode that implies a particular social-psychological view of human motivation and behavior; and authoritativeness, a quality perceived to characterize both newsradio discourse and the channel itself. Newsradio appeals to persons of high socioeconomic status as a convenient headline and service information channel that supplements other news sources. But many all-news listeners rank low in socioeconomic status and are members of relatively disenfranchised minorities. This atypical audience for news seems to use newsradio because the intellectual and monetary costs of listening are low. Newsradio's value-laden representations of worldly affairs may affect the attitudes and social sentiments of these two sorts of listeners quite differently. All-news radio capitalizes on reiteration both to present effectively its service information content and to present itself as a reliable, ever-available service resourse. (Author/HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED232221

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Michael B. Woal
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

All-News Radio Journalism: Source, Message and Audience

Michael B. Woal

Department of Speech Communication

The Pennsylvania State University

July 1982

This essay will appear in Vol. XXXIX of
Pennsylvania Speech Communication Annual, 1983.

CS 504251

ABSTRACT

All-News Radio Journalism:
Source, Message and Audience

Michael B. Woal
Department of Speech Communication
The Pennsylvania State University

July 1982

All-news radio is an important journalistic voice for large audiences. Three aspects of newsradio messages are examined: legitimatization, dramatic narration and authoritativeness. These qualities serve proprietors' interests in maximizing audience size. Beyond that, they suggest a picture of worldly affairs as personalized dramatic action prompted by universal and familiar motives.

Newsradio appeals to persons of high socioeconomic status as a convenient headline and service information channel which supplements other news sources. But many all-news listeners rank low in socioeconomic status and are members of relatively disenfranchised minorities. This atypical audience-for-news seems to use newsradio because the intellectual and monetary costs of listening are low. Newsradio's value-laden representations of worldly affairs may affect the attitudes and social sentiments of these two sorts of listeners quite differently.

Introduction

All-news radio has become much more than a media curiosity since today's newsradio stations started up in the mid-1960s. It gives large audiences simple fable-like dramas of worldly affairs embedded in a repetitious flow of terse content that has become a distinctive form of mass media journalism. In 1973 newsradio was the main daytime source of news for 54% of city dwellers over 18 years of age.[1] In an average week in 1976 New York's two newsradio stations (WINS and WCBS) reached 40% of all adults in their 17-county metropolitan area.[2] In the Philadelphia area, during drive time on a typical weekday in 1979 one out of every four radio listeners was tuned to KYW, that city's newsradio station.[3]

Newsradio is well-suited to some important journalistic functions. It is a notable local news voice which can help to round out newspaper coverage. As an important channel for fast-breaking urgent news, newsradio may have substantial influence on popular sentiment and public policy in delicate situations.

Many newsradio listeners are relatively well-off and literate--persons whom both media audience research[4] and casual thought see as the important audience for mass news. But many are rather poorly educated members of economically depressed minorities. For the first group, newsradio is a supplementary headline and information service; for the second group, it is a primary news source in a much more substantial sense.[5] The different roles which newsradio plays for these two audiences reflect how persons' socioeconomic situations shape their use of media news channels.

Newsradio Content

Newsradio first became popular with a tight, highly structured format devised by Gordon McLendon for XTRA (Tiajuana) and WNUS (Chicago) in 1961 and 1965.[6] McLendon had a definite idea about all-news radio:

> To the extent that all-news is monotonous, it will succeed. To the extent that it is not, it will fail.[7]

The following description of all-news programming at WNUS vividly portrays how this philosophy was implemented:

> [The] station puts out ninety-six fifteen-minute newscasts round-the-clock. Each newscast contains about twenty-five different items covering the whole spectrum of world, national, and local news. There are no features, no celebrity interviews, no news analysis . . . the news comes as straight as the twelve news wires used by WNUS can make it.
>
> The wire-service reports are taken straight from the teleprinter and the newsmen are expressly forbidden to re-write . . .
>
> The cumulative effect of this is just what the boss asked for--unadulterated monotony. The presentation and style are monumentally dull. The fifteen-minute segments are rehashed and updated by changing from one wire service to the other if there has been no new development.[8]

McLendon ended the all-news format at XTRA and WNUS in 1968.[9] By then a number of Group W and CBS outlets had begun operation as the first of the current generation of newsradio stations.[10] Group W's and CBS's newsradio programming was and is more expansive than that done by McLendon. They disdained his rip and read approach, and called for "editors and writers . . .[and] actuality."[11] At the Group W stations programming is governed by the "newswheel"[12] concept developed at WINS

(New York) in 1964. A similar "dartboard principle"[13] is used at CBS outlets. Programming at other newsradio stations is generally much the same.[14]

The newswheel concept calls for cyclic programming in which time units are introduced and concluded by summaries of major stories, and punctuated with service information reports, ads and sports at regular positions. Minor stories and changing features fill the gaps.[15] All-news programming practices are such that different newswheel spans (KYW uses a one-hour newswheel; WINS, a 22-minute cycle[16]) produce quite similar patterns of repetition of content. Newsradio programming today, despite relaxation of McLendon's tight formula, is still a concise repetitious headline service, as analysis of a typical hour on WINS in 1978 shows:

> Twenty-four different news stories, 5 features, 14 weather/temperature reports, 21 headlines, 16 time checks, 11 minutes of sports, 17 minutes of commercials. Of the 24 news stories: 9 local, 10 national, 5 international.[17]

Newsradio as Commercial Enterprise

Form in all-news discourse is both strategic and also constitutive of a construction of worldly affairs which has force apart from and beyond its originators' purpose. To maximize the size of audiences all-news programming avoids specific partisan appeals. The rationale for this is general to modern mass media.[18] Successful local newspaper monopolies are founded on the appeal of seemingly objective, multifunctional content for large heterogeneous audiences. Barron[19] has argued that the

conceptual ideal of commercial television programming is a vacuum of ideas. The bland thematic matter of most television programs fills this vacuum so as to alienate the fewest viewers.

The point is that the economic motives of newsradio are best served by the paradigm of so-called objective mass media journalism, a rhetorical strategy which eschews partisan appeals. A rhetoric which enacts speakers' intentions in such a way can only be assimilated to the traditional neo-Aristotelian view with some strain. It is the ostensible abandonment of partisan appeals that serves the private economic ends of all-news broadcasters. The objective mass journalism paradigm in newsradio has consequences which go far beyond the commercial success sought by all-news proprietors.

Newsradio as Mass Journalism

Three aspects of the objective journalistic style are important in forming the discourse of newsradio: legitimatization, the creation of hierarchies of values; dramatic narration, a representational mode which implies a particular social-psychological view of human motivation and behavior; and authoritativeness, a quality perceived to characterize both newsradio discourse and the channel itself.[20]

Legitimatization

Legitimacy is an idea both subtle and obvious. It is, in the first place, the endowment with salience which message content acquires by being selected as a subject for important symbolic discourse. In newsradio, the mere mention of an event, issue or situation implies that the

matter is significant. The placement and play given the content are additional indices of its importance. For example the top story of the KYW newswheel cycle which is looked at below,[21] the Iranian embassy hostage crisis, is previewed at 8:00, treated in full at 8:03-8:06 and recapped at 8:14 when more details are promised at 8:30.

Besides legitimatizing situations as worthy of attention, newsradio implicitly underwrites ideas about the nature of social values. Since the objective journalism paradigm generates content of general appeal, it is not surprising that the values which it legitimatizes are close to the cultural center.

An example occurs in a brief mention[22] of political maneuvering in Rhodesia. The item cites one aspect of the coming of independence: the transfer of power to an interim British governor prior to settlement with guerilla freedom fighters. Print news accounts showed that the social integration of the guerilla armies was at least as crucial to the success of independence as was this political arrangement. However the newsradio report focuses on the political transfer of power and thereby implies that the social issue is not problematic. The preposition "prior" suggests temporal sequence but gives no hint of substantive problems. Legitimacy is attributed to institutions of the social-political establishment. That which is done in the centers of power is news; the activity of the disenfranchised is rarely news (except as it threatens or disrupts social order). The situation of guerilla bush fighters in Rhodesia, like that of marginal ghetto-dwellers in America, is not legitimate copy for newsradio whereas the doings of the Rhodesian

Parliament are. The fact that problems of social intergration in Rhodesia turned out to be at least as formidable as those of political cohesion shows how newsradio's legitimatization of topical history is no simple rendering of the world of human affairs but rather is a particular value-laden symbolic construction of that world.

Dramatic Narration

The objective journalism paradigm encourages a dramatic narrative construction of content in newsradio. Narrative form presents action which seems to be unfiltered by personal bias since the reporter stands outside the narrative. The channel characteristics of newsradio also encourage narration. It is a simple way to organize content whose presentation is oral and therefore sequential and ephemeral. Content typically is presented as an unfolding plot-line in which recognizable agents interact. The action commonly implies that rather primitive and universal motives--self-preservation, greed, pride, etc.--are at work in the news-making world. These springs of action are readily comprehended by newsradio's mass audience. Time sequence is straightforward; aesthetic distortions, such as flashbacks, are rare.

The newswheel's top story[23] on the embassy hostage crisis illustrates newsradio's dramatic narration. The story quickly mentions a number of dramatis personae who are mostly recognizable agents engaged in protagonist-antagonist confrontations. The cast includes Khomeini, Carter, Vance, a dissident ayatollah, a captive U.S. Marine, battling factions in Iran and cadres of White House aides and State Department officials. The characters

participate in a dramatic narrative which is played on an imposing stage. Action occurs at the White House and State Department in Washington, at the U.S. embassy in Teheran, at a broadcast station in another Iranian city and in two western European countries. All this is about 225 words! Almost every sentence relates personalized action embodied in a simple transitive verb. The effect is dramatic narration in the classical, Homeric vein:

> The Ayatollah Khomeini is defying...presidential aides say...Secretary of State Vance arrived...fighting continues...the army is patrolling.[24]

The newsradio audience is given a dramatic narrative, a scenario of plot. But the force of issues such as economic viability, political cohesion and national identity are largely ignored. Such substantive aspects of the situation are barely suggested ("It is not known for certain whom they [the army] report to. The opposing ayatollah is accusing Khomeini of sliding toward dictatorship in Iran"[25]) and they are not enlarged upon.

The correspondent's report[26] that follows on "reaction from the State Department," might be expected to take a more analytical posture but it too has the structure and tone of dramatic narration:

> The State Department and the White House say... The State Department reminds...Goulahouse said... he does not know...The White House and the State Department are again challenging.[27]

Authoritativeness

All-news discourse has a peculiar air of authority about it. Newsradio's intrinsic capacity for legitimatizing content and its presentation of seemingly objective narration have force in establishing this

air of authority. Beyond that newsradio's ability to provide timely actuality coverage generates a sense of confidence in its reportage and suggests that the newsradio message is significant and authentic--in short, that it is authoritative. This impression is reinforced by reliable service reports of time, weather, traffic and other information-for-use, such as announcements of community activities. The character of newsradio as an authoritative service channel lends weight to it as an authoritative news channel.

The Newsradio Audience

Functional analysis[28] of the newsradio audience has provided some insights which are surprising in view of what might be expected of a mass audience for news. Typically audience interest in media news has been found to be directly related to socioeconomic status (SES).[29] A considerable number of newsradio listeners are typical in that they tend to be relatively older, well-educated, professionally employed and interested in delayed reward news.[30] However a substantial part of the newsradio audience shows a very different profile.

Trade sources and newsradio broadcasters are aware that many of newsradio's most committed listeners stand relatively low in SES. The Associated Press has reported that newsradio is particularly appealing to individuals of low as well as high SES.[31] KYW Newsradio staffers know that many of their listeners are Black and therefore presumably of relatively low SES.[32] While persons of high SES report listening to newsradio in order to learn about newsworthy happenings and to keep

informed and up-to-date, lower SES auditors report listening for companionship and relaxation as much as for information. Such listeners are interested in both delayed and immediate reward types of news.[33]

These findings suggest that at least for lower SES persons the newsradio channel has appeal as channel. That is, to an important degree newsradio listening seems to be not function-specific or content-specific, but rather channel-specific. Persons of relatively low SES seem to choose (or be forced to limit themselves to) media channels whose monetary and intellectual cost of consumption is low.[34] A KYW Newsradio staffer has observed that newsradio's appeal for Blacks stems from the fact that listening is "not a literary process."[35] It is interesting to think what such socioeconomically and culturally disenfranchised listeners make of newsradio's legitimatization of the sociocultural establishment.

Summation

Newsradio programming hardly resembles extended journalistic discourse. It is rather a patchwork of headline news, personal service information, brief soft features and commercial messages.[36] An informal inventory of the fifteen-minute segment beginning at 8:00 A.M. of the KYW newswheel cycle which has been referred to here reveals:

weather information (80 words; all word counts are approximate);
previews of major stories (150);
selected sports results (50);
traffic conditions report (150);
commuter train conditions report (50);
top story (Iranian embassy crisis, 450);
previews of lesser stories (50);
two commercial spots (250);
weather report (50);
lesser story (deployment of missles by NATO nations, including a report from a Moscow-based correspondent, 225);
lesser story (NORAD's loss of a communications satellite, 125);
report on a local organization's Christmas party for needy children (75);
report on a local boy scout's work with handicapped youngsters (50);
lesser story (report on a New York commuter railway strike, 100);
lesser story (coming of independence to Rhodesia, 50);
commercial spot (75);
weather report (125);
commercial spot (75);
recap of top stories (50).

This representative quarter-hour also includes seven time checks and a number of brief (less than 25 words) story previews, recaps and promotions of upcoming features. Embedded in this heterogeneous stream are the simple dramas of worldly affairs generated by the objective mass journalism paradigm.

Newsradio is not a conventional channel of journalistic intelligence so much as a multifunctional information service both for upwardly-mobile listeners for news who use it as a convenient headline service while commuting, and for marginally literate ghetto-dwellers who listen because the monetary and intellectual cost of consumption is low. Relevant models for such a channel are the advertiser gazette of colonial America and the contemporary shopper newspaper. Like newsradio these forms are marked by seeming objectivity, presentation of news in brief dispatch

or headline form, local focus and prominence of commercial matter.

It is of newsradio as a specialized service channel that McLendon said:

> To the extent that all-news is monotonous it will succeed. To the extent that it is not it will fail.[37]

All-news radio capitalizes on reiteration both to present effectively its service-information content and to emblematize itself as a reliable, ever-available service resource.

NOTES

1. H.R. Bruskin Associates study, cited in R. Powers and J. Oppenheim, "The Failed Promise of All-News Radio," Columbia Journalism Review 12 (Sept./Oct. 1973): 21-28.
2. Scott, cited in "All-News Stations Continue Successfully, Primarily as a Large-Market Phenomenon," Television/Radio Age, December 6, 1976, pp. 42-43; 79-81. The recent change to all-news on WABC gives New York newsradio service on the flagship stations of Group W, CBS and ABC.
3. Arbitron Radio: Audience Estimates [illegible] Arbitron Market of Philadelphia (Jan/Feb 1979) (Belt[illegible] The Arbitron Co., 1979).
4. J. Lull, L. Johnson, and C. Swee[illegible]diences for Contemporary Radio Formats," Journal of Broadcasting 22 (1978): 439-453.
5. M. Woal, "The Uses of All-News Radio: A Functional Analysis of How and Why the KYW Newsradio (Philadelphia) Audience Listens" (Masters thesis, Temple University, 1980), pp. 227-228.
6. J. Williams, "All News All the Time," Quill 66 (March 1978): 21-26. XTRA broadcast to southern California audiences.
7. Ibid., p. 22.
8. J. Altman, "Local Radio: All-news Sound: WNUS, Chicago," Columbia Journalism Review 4 (Summer 1965): 23-24.
9. Williams, "All News All the Time."
10. Group W began broadcasting all-news in 1964 on WINS (New York), in 1965 on KYW (Philadelphia), and in 1968 on KFWB (Los Angeles).

CBS began offering all-news in 1967 on WCBS (New York), in 1968 on KNX (Los Angeles), and shortly thereafter on WBBM (Chicago) and KCBS (San Francisco). (Powers and Oppenheim, "Failed Promise.") More recently, NBC attempted to establish newsradio as a network service. Its News and Information Service (NIS) gave subscribing stations 30 minutes per hour of network world and national news, with the stations programming an equal amount of local news. About 70 stations subscribed, but the cost of the all-news operation and audiences' lack of enthusiasm for its non-local content led NBC to end the service after two years in 1977. The NIS experiment is reviewed in "Lack of Local News Held Key Factor in Demise of NIS," Television/Radio Age, December 6, 1976, pp. 43; 81; 83.

11. Pack, quoted in Williams, "All News All the Time," p. 23.
12. Powers and Oppenheim, "Failed Promise," p. 23.
13. S. Knoll, "Choice of Two in All-news," Variety, December 4, 1968, p. 35; "The All-News Way of Radio Journalism," Broadcasting, January 6, 1975, p. 38.
14. See, for example, descriptions of all-news programming at WTOP (Washington, D.C.) and at KRMC (Oklahoma City) in "The All-News Way of Radio Journalism," pp. 36-42.
15. All-news programming strategies are discussed in D. Brewer, "All-News Programming," in Broadcast Programming: Strategies for Winning Television and Radio Audiences, ed. S. Eastman, S. Head, and L. Klein (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1981), pp. 289-310.

16. Interview with R. Shapiro, KYW acting general manager, Philadelphia, August 17, 1981; a 1981 television spot for WINS boasted "Give us 22 minutes and we'll give you the world."

17. J. Williams, "One Day in the Life of an All-news Editor," Quill 66 (March 1978): 24.

18. A broad discussion of the sociology of television news which implicitly bears on all-news radio is G. Tuchman, ed., The TV Establishment: Programming for Power and Profit (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp. 41-89. The salience of commercial motives in mass media (specifically, in television) is the subject of E. Barnouw, The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

19. J. Barron, Freedom of the press for whom? the right of access to mass media (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

20. This discussion draws in part on R. Gregg, "The Rhetoric of Political Newscasting," Central States Speech Journal 28 (1977): 221-237.

21. The all-news discourse referred to was broadcast by KYW (Philadelphia) on December 11, 1979, 8:00-9:00 A.M. It is cited hereafter as "KYW transcript."

22. "The process of surrendering power to Britain after 15 years of unrecognized independence begins today in Rhodesia with Parliament debating its own dissolution. The action involves transfer of power to a British governor for an interim period prior to a majority rule settlement with a guerilla alliance." (KYW transcript.)

23. "The leader of Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini, is defying the United States this morning to blockade his nation. In the United States presidential aides say Mr. Carter would not sit idlely by if the 50 U.S. hostages are put on trial. Meantime Secretary of State Vance arrived in Rome early this morning Philadelphia time, about 9:00 Italian time, stilling looking for support from western leaders for economic sanctions against Iran. Later today he'll go to West Germany and then on to Brussels for the NATO winter meeting. The provincial fighting continues in Iran's [unintelligible] city of [unintelligible]. At least 11 people are now known dead and about 80 people have been wounded in the fighting. After supporters of first a moderate ayatollah and then the Ayatollah Khomeini took the broadcasting station in [unintelligible], now the army is patrolling the roof of the broadcast center guns in hand. It is not known for certain whom they report to. The opposing ayatollah is accusing Khomeini of sliding toward dictatorship in Iran. The hostages, at least according to one of them, are doing all right. Twenty-one-year-old Corporal William Goulahouse, of Pueblo, Colorado, was interviewed by NBC and he said their captors have treated them 'really good' as he put it: 'No one's been mistreated.' ABC and CBS refused the interview because of conditions imposed by the Moslems holding the embassy." (KYW transcript.)

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. "With reaction from the State Department, Nancy Coffee in Washington: 'The State Department and the White House say it's cool and clinical for the captors to exploit the American hostages for propaganda. Beyond that the State Department has little reaction to a television interview with one of the hostages, Marine Corporal William Goulahouse. The State Department reminds Americans that anything the hostages say, they say under duress. Goulahouse said he is well treated, but he also said that about twenty of the senior American diplomats have been separated from the rest and that he does not know their whereabouts. The White House and the State Department are again challenging the captors to let in independent observers who would visit each of the hostages to determine for themselves if the hostages are as well treated as their captors claim. This is Nancy Coffee, Group W News, Washington.'" (KYW transcript.)

27. Ibid.

28. Woal, "The Uses of All-News Radio."

29. Bagdikian, The Information Machines: Their Impact on Men and the Media (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 46-53; Lull, Johnson, and Sweeny, "Audiences for Contemporary Radio Formats."

30. Delayed reward news is "serious" news, such as reports of political and economic affairs, social problems and commentary. See W. Schramm, "The Nature of News," Journalism Quarterly 26 (1949): 259-269, and W. Schramm and D. White, "Age, Education, Economic Status: Factors in Newspaper Reading," Journalism Quarterly 26 (1949): 149-159.

31. Radio News Listening Attitudes (n.p.: AP Research, n.d.).

32. Interview with Mark Tomizawa, KYW advertising/sales promotion assistant, Philadelphia, June 1, 1979.

33. Woal, "The Uses of All-News Radio," pp. 227-228.

34. R. Martin, J. McNelly, and F. Izcaray, "Is Media Exposure Unidimensional: A Socioeconomic Approach," Journalism Quarterly 53 (1976): 619-625.

35. Interview with Tomizawa.

36. In all-news programming there are few hard contours between program and commercial continuities. Airmen regularly read commercial announcements. It is not far-fetched to imagine that this melding of commercial and journalistic elements educates listeners in a particular way: to see themselves as active consuming components in the private enterprise system which newsradio implicitly portrays as embedded in the news-making world.

37. Williams, "All News All the Time," p. 22.